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COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 44th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 25 November 1999, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Mrs. BONOAN-DANDAN

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS:

(a) REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES IN ACCORDANCE WITH ARTICLES 16 AND 17 OF THE COVENANT (agenda item 6) (continued)

Third periodic report of Mexico (HRI/CORE/1/Add.12/Rev.1; E/1994/104/Add.18; E/C.12/Q/MEX/1; written replies to the list of issues, and additional statistics in Spanish only, prepared by the Government of Mexico (documents without a reference number))

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of Mexico took places at the Committee table.

2. Mr. GONZÁLEZ FELIX (Mexico) said that the third periodic report of Mexico (E/1994/104/Add.18) contained details of the progress made and the measures adopted in compliance with the provisions of the Covenant between 1992 and 1996. One of the Mexican Government's highest priorities had been to combat poverty and to enhance the well-being of the whole of its population. Mexican social policy was designed to reduce the inequalities between regions, groups and the sexes, and was thus directed at the most marginalized and vulnerable regions, and at securing the advancement of women. The Government had committed itself to incorporating the gender perspective in all its activities and policies. To that end, in 1995 a National Programme for Women had been set up to enhance the role of women in all government programmes, and in the executive, legislative and judicial branches.

3. In its social development policy, Mexico devoted most of its resources to basic services and support. Social spending currently constituted 60 per cent of the programme budget, with special attention devoted to education, health and food. Ninety-one highly marginalized regions had been singled out for priority. Of the 91, 36 required immediate attention as a result of their extreme poverty. Sixty per cent of overall expenditure under budget line No. 26, devoted to social development and production in poor regions, was allocated to promoting job-creation and income opportunities in priority areas. Investment to combat poverty, comprising income opportunities and the development of physical and human capital, had increased by 11.9 per cent in real terms and was mainly targeted on rural areas where poverty levels were highest.

4. Budget line No. 26 was implemented in four major areas of activity: the Production Development Fund; the Regional Development Fund; the Priority Groups Assistance Fund; and the Social Investment and Community Development Fund. The Production Development Fund was mainly designed to generate sustainable employment by exploiting the human and production resources of impoverished social groups. The Fund covered such diverse activities as temporary employment programmes, social enterprises, Crédito a la Palabra, economic development opportunities for women and indigenous regional funds. Its temporary employment programme was designed to generate employment and income in the poorest communities through social and production infrastructure projects, with particular emphasis on the 36 priority regions. Its social enterprises programme consisted of initiatives to create, extend and consolidate such enterprises for producers living in poor rural and urban areas. During 1999,

social enterprises had been set up with risk capital and by means of special funding in coordination with other bodies and the beneficiaries themselves. Crédito a la Palabra provided funding to producers who participated in the programme. Other resources had been redirected to the 91 priority regions and, in particular, to the 36 regions requiring immediate attention.

5. The Fund's economic development for women programme was designed to boost the economy and create employment and income opportunities for women living in the priority regions. By means of the federal funding allocated, in 1999 alone 2,332 production projects had been implemented involving factories, bakeries, flour mills, animal husbandry and aquaculture.

6. The indigenous regional funds provided resources for expanding, improving and consolidating the production infrastructure of indigenous communities along lines determined by the communities themselves. The funds also helped to incorporate indigenous peoples' requirements in municipal and regional development strategies. Twenty-four regional funds had been established in the State of Chiapas, covering agricultural, cattle-raising, agro-industrial, trade and services activities. In addition, the National Indigenous Peoples Institute (INI) provided regional funding for various bodies from budget lines other than No. 26.

7. The Regional Development Fund focused on the identification, planning and implementation of regional and subregional projects in areas of immediate importance. Studies and assessments were conducted at regional level and policies and strategies drawn up for activities such as the compensation scheme for the Cañadas region in the State of Chiapas, under which almost 900 basic social infrastructure projects had been implemented and drinking water systems upgraded and expanded.

8. The Priority Groups Assistance Fund supported disadvantaged or vulnerable groups by involving them in production and social welfare projects. The main programmes implemented by the Fund were the National Low-Income Agricultural Labourers Programme and the National Agricultural Labourers Programme. The first, designed to improve the living conditions of migrant labourers and to satisfy their health, food and housing needs, also covered social security, education, culture and recreation, employment, training and access to justice. The second programme was targeted on community organizations and inhabitants of rural areas living in poverty, providing alternative production and employment projects and social assistance to 138,000 low-income farmers.

9. The Social Investment and Community Development Fund was designed to secure new funding for social welfare programmes, to promote a sense of shared responsibility among citizens, and to train social groups and public servants in community development activities. The Fund provided health care and educational assistance for the poor and disabled. In 1999 it had helped 715 civil organizations to implement job-creation and training projects throughout the country.

10. In August 1997, the National Education, Health and Food Aid Programme (PROGRESA) had been launched, offering assistance to 400,000 families living in extreme poverty. In 1999 it had been extended to cover a further 2.3 million families living in 48,000 villages with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. Eighty per cent of families affected by extreme poverty were now offered some kind of assistance. The driving force behind PROGRESA was the conviction that

a higher level of education improved the use of health services by inculcating notions of hygiene and prevention. Healthy children achieved better results in school, while proper nutrition was essential to the development and full use of human learning capacities. A higher level of education also led indirectly to better eating habits, because of the higher levels of income generally associated with good education.

11. The fundamental educational aim of PROGRESA was to promote regular attendance at school by offering grants as an incentive for young people to complete their studies. Girls were offered higher grants than boys since they were more likely than boys to drop out of school. In 1998-1999, PROGRESA had awarded grants to 1.7 million youngsters. The programme was also designed to tackle the problem of children abandoning their studies to enter the labour market. It also provided vitamin and mineral supplements to children below the age of five, and to pregnant and breastfeeding mothers. A monthly allowance was also available to reduce food bills.

12. Families received a basic package of health services free of charge. Preventive measures taken to assist the growth and development of children included ensuring that they were vaccinated and properly fed. Women were accorded special attention, particularly during pregnancy and childbirth and with regard to family planning; programmes had been introduced for the prevention, early detection and elimination of cervical cancer, and to combat high blood pressure, diabetes and tuberculosis. Allowances were paid directly to the mothers, in the belief that as they usually ran the home, women were more likely to make responsible use of the resources available, particularly where school attendance was concerned. The grants awarded under PROGRESA and the provision of free textbooks had resulted in a 30 per cent increase in enrolment. Since the beginning of the 1997-1998 school year, more and more young people in rural areas had begun to return to their studies, and families had begun to participate in community assemblies at which it was decided who was eligible to receive benefits, the features of the programme were explained, and a community volunteer chosen to promote the programme. The Promoters were required to offer parents guidance on their responsibilities, supervise the use of funds by the beneficiaries, and pass on requests and suggestions made by the families concerned.

13. PROGRESA also sought to enable women to enhance their personal development on an equal footing with men. In the past few years it had financed more than 20,000 women's enterprise projects, and more than 700,000 rural families had benefited from support for small-scale production activities carried out by women in the home.

14. The Government considered education a decisive factor in personal development and social progress. One quarter of all government spending was devoted to education and greater efforts were being made to promote academic excellence and to create more options for higher and technological studies. That effort was beginning to bear fruit: 90 per cent of children between the ages of 6 and 14 were now in primary education and over 90 per cent of 15-year-olds completed their education. More than 5 million young people were in secondary education and nearly 3 million in higher education, a significant increase on 1994. The growth in numbers was the result of the targeting of disadvantaged social groups. Thus 53 per cent of the increase in coverage in basic education in 1997-1998 was due to the attention devoted to indigenous communities and to community courses, chiefly in rural areas; 50 per cent of the

increase in numbers of pupils in secondary education was attributable to distance learning, which had proved to be one of the most effective measures for increasing coverage and achieving equal access to education at that level. Four million primary schoolchildren received a package of school materials free of charge and additional training had been provided to 800,000 teachers, including all those in schools for indigenous peoples.

15. Community courses helped to provide education in remote and scattered communities. In the 1997-1998 school year, 243,500 pupils had been registered at pre-school and primary levels. Education had been provided for over a million youngsters in 52 indigenous languages and dialects. One of the most important achievements of community teaching in the past year had been the expansion of courses beyond primary school level. In that connection the National Council for the Promotion of Education was developing post-primary community courses implementing the requirements of the national basic education curriculum. At primary level, syllabuses had been revised and materials developed to give children a sense of responsibility vis-à-vis the environment and towards themselves. A total of 163 million new textbooks had been distributed free of charge in the current school year, an increase of 62 million on 1994. Similarly, 90 per cent of all pupils in public secondary schools now received free textbooks from federal sources.

16. The Government was conducting a wholesale reform of general education: teacher-training institutions had been upgraded and more in-service training was being provided. Teachers' Centres had become an important forum for exchanges of ideas and experience; each centre had a library, meeting rooms and other facilities such as video and audio libraries, multimedia equipment and access to the EDUSAT satellite network. There were now 480 such centres in the country.

17. In addition to PROGRESA the Government was implementing other programmes designed to ensure that malnutrition and lack of economic resources did not compel children to abandon their studies prematurely. Thus, 4.5 million school meals were distributed every day, 4.2 million rural schoolchildren, including all those from indigenous communities, received educational material free of charge, and more than 3 million pupils in basic education received grants.

18. Health was regarded by the Government as a sine qua non for the progress and well-being of the people. Health-care spending represented the largest increase in budget spending: 70 per cent in real terms; 156 new hospitals and 2,800 health centres had been set up, and 45,000 doctors and nurses recruited to the health services. That investment meant that by 2000 all Mexicans would have access to basic health services in hospitals, clinics, health centres or mobile units. In the area of preventive medicine, 90 per cent of all children under the age of five were vaccinated against 12 different diseases, including, poliomyelitis and meningitis.

19. Those were only a few of the most important measures taken by the Mexican Government to combat extreme poverty, to improve health and education services, and to achieve equality between men and women. Fuller information on those and other questions was to be found in the third periodic report. Mexico would continue to make significant efforts to ensure the full enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights by all its citizens. It would also continue to cooperate with the international community in the promotion and protection of

human rights and fundamental freedoms, thereby strengthening the institutions established to promote the rights of individuals and reflecting its desire to provide a better future for its people.

20. Mr. SADI, noting that Mexico had espoused the market economy and had joined the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, asked what the impact of those two measures had been on the national economy and on the rights proclaimed in the Covenant. He also requested a breakdown of the Mexican national budget, and in particular, details of social expenditures.

21. The third periodic report and the statement just made to the Committee suggested that Mexico had adopted an ambitious social development programme. That being so, was the public aware of the Covenant and of the importance of issues such as health, housing and education? Similarly, were policy makers aware of the Covenant? Mexico faced many serious problems with regard to poverty, unemployment and illiteracy, and policies formulated in response to those problems would need to take account of the Covenant's provisions.

22. Mr. GRISSA said that according to paragraph 38 of the report (E/1994/104/Add.18), article 27 of the Constitution had been amended in 1992 to provide that the land of indigenous groups would be protected. What exactly was meant by the word "protected"? Was it necessary to protect the land of communities against the intrusion of outsiders, or from being exploited by the communities themselves? How effective had such protection been, given the persistence of problems relating to land use in the south of the country, for instance in Chiapas? Were plants used for the production of narcotic drugs being cultivated on such lands?

23. Mr. RIEDEL said that the Government's written replies were comprehensive and very helpful. He noted that although the Covenant formed part of domestic legislation in Mexico, so far there had been not one single ruling by the Supreme Court or collegiate courts based on any international human rights treaty. However, he was aware of the existence of a number of institutions that dealt specifically with human rights issues in the country. Was there also a national ombudsman? Had the National Human Rights Commission examined the Committee's concluding observations on Mexico's second periodic report and, if so, what had been its reaction to them?

24. He was pleased to note that the Mexican Government favoured drawing up an optional protocol along the lines of those to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. He also understood that the Government was currently giving the matter further consideration. When did the delegation expect that the Government would be ready to submit its conclusions on an optional protocol to the Committee or to the High Commissioner for Human Rights? Was the Government in favour of a procedure based on individual complaints, or of one also based on complaints from States parties and NGOs?

25. Mr. ANTANOVICH said he was greatly impressed by the details of Mexico's progress provided in the delegation's introductory statement and the Government's written submissions, which were corroborated by the fact that Mexico now ranked fiftieth in the human development index. However, he still harboured some doubts as to whether the Government was really making an effort to fulfil its obligations under article 2 of the Covenant. He was greatly concerned by the report submitted jointly by a large number of non-governmental

organizations (NGOs) (E/C.12/1999/NGO/3), which referred to the recent exacerbation of existing problems, including poverty, which it attributed to the Government's recent measures aimed at modernization and privatization in the context of the globalization of the economy. Of particular concern was the statement in the report to the effect that reforms to the Mexican Institute of Social Security Act represented a retrograde step in terms of respect for economic, social and cultural rights. The general tone of the report implied that the situation was getting quite out of hand, and cast doubts on the Government's ability to handle such problems more efficiently in the future. Did the Government have the situation under control? How did the delegation evaluate the NGO report? Was there any cooperation between the Government and NGOs, for instance in the preparation of periodic reports?

26. Mr. TEXIER said that, given the size of its delegation, it was evident that the Mexican Government took the dialogue with the Committee very seriously; however, the same was clearly true of Mexican civil society, in view of the considerable input it too had provided.

27. One of the issues highlighted in the Committee's concluding observations on the second periodic report had been poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth. Paradoxically, despite the Government's efforts to tackle the problem of poverty through specific programmes, official figures provided by the Ministry for Social Development indicated that in 1996 there had been 40 million poor people in the country, 26 million of whom had been extremely poor. Those figures were considerably higher than those provided for 1994, and apparently the situation had not improved between 1996 and 1999. What were the reasons for the further increase in the number of poor and extremely poor in Mexico? Why were they to be found in the largest numbers in parts of the country that were not necessarily the poorest in terms of natural resources, such as Chiapas? What was the explanation for such an unequal distribution of wealth?

28. Mr. THAPALIA said that the concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the eleventh periodic and initial reports of Mexico respectively (CERD/C/304/Add.30 and CRC/C/15/Add.13) expressed concern about extreme poverty, problems associated with land rights and other disparities affecting the indigenous populations and their children. He would welcome more information on the real situation of such populations and any efforts being made by the Government to resolve their problems. What was the explanation for their continued suffering in spite of government measures to improve the overall socio-economic conditions of the Mexican nation?

29. Mr. AHMED drew attention to the fact that many of the social and economic troubles currently affecting Mexican society were precisely those that had prevailed at the time of submission of Mexico's second periodic report, almost six years previously. Among the factors and difficulties impeding the implementation of the Covenant highlighted by the Committee in its concluding observations concerning that report had been heavy foreign debt, inadequate budget allocations for essential social services and an unequal distribution of wealth. The Committee's principal subjects of concern had included extreme poverty, the plight of the indigenous populations, and of abandoned and street children, and the inadequate living and housing conditions of large sectors of the population.

30. Similarly, numerous NGOs had reported a serious downturn in economic and social conditions of late, largely as a result of structural adjustment policies introduced 17 years previously, which had given macroeconomic market indicators precedence over the welfare of the population. According to statistics provided by the Ministry of Social Development there had been an increase of some 9 million in the numbers of extremely poor between 1994 and 1996; while statistics from the Colegio de México gave a considerably higher estimate of around 15 million for the same period. It was also estimated that between 1976 and 1998 salaries had lost 86 per cent of their purchasing power.

31. While he was fully aware of the enormity of the problems faced, he hoped that the Mexican delegation, as the delegation of a nation which had witnessed one of the earliest social welfare revolutions, would demonstrate in the course of the dialogue the various means by which the Government was at least endeavouring to bring about positive change and mitigate the effects of the country's social and economic ills.

32. Mr. RATTRAY said he hoped that the dialogue with the Mexican delegation would provide a clear understanding of the real situation with respect to economic, social and cultural rights. He recognized the very great difficulties the Mexican Government faced in trying to improve the overall socio-economic conditions so that such rights could be enjoyed by all. A wealth of information had been furnished on measures adopted in that connection. However, he wondered how exactly the Government viewed the rights set forth in the Covenant. Did it regard them as strict legal obligations which it was duty-bound to fulfil; as aspirations which could progressively be achieved; or did it regard some rights as falling into the former and others into the latter category? Had the Government established any benchmarks or indicators in connection with the programmes implemented to determine their level of success within a given time-frame for the purposes of reviews? It would be particularly useful if such information were provided in Mexico's next periodic report.

33. In trade negotiations undertaken in connection with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and, more specifically, the World Trade Organization (WTO), did the Mexican Government consciously bear in mind the possible impact of agreements entered into on its compliance with obligations concerning such rights as the rights to work and to an adequate standard of living? The entry into the Mexican market of foreign competition must surely have had an effect on employment and on other important sectors.

34. Mr. CEVILLE said the written reply to number 9 in the list of issues implied that the reason why there had so far been not one ruling by a Mexican court based on international human rights treaties was that the judiciary were not sufficiently familiar with such instruments - hence the proposal under the National Programme for the Advancement and Strengthening of Human Rights for the organization of training courses for judges and civil servants. Had such training courses already got under way and, if so, could the delegation provide some details on them? Would such courses increase the likelihood of the Covenant being invoked in the Mexican courts?

35. Mrs. JIMÉNEZ BUTRAGUEÑO said that in its written replies the Government had acknowledged the growing importance of NGOs in all areas, allowing for their greater participation in government action. To what extent were NGOs involved in the four major areas of activity outlined by the delegation in its introductory statement?

36. The CHAIRPERSON invited the delegation to reply to Members' questions relating to the general provisions.

37. Mr. TIRADO ZAVALA (Mexico) said the Government's concern at NAFTA's potential impact on Mexican jobs had induced it to initiate a series of programmes in the framework of the Employment, Training and Protection of Labour Rights Programme, including the Integrated Quality and Modernization Programme (CIMO) and the National Programme of Training Grants for Unemployed Workers (PROBECAT). PROBECAT, administered through the National Employment Service (SNE) and partially funded by the World Bank, facilitated access to work for the unemployed, early school leavers, workers displaced by the restructuring of production and first-time job seekers. It also advised newly established, expanding or relocating businesses, and provided job counselling and special placement of disabled workers. In 1995 it had begun to offer local employment initiatives for the unemployed or underemployed seeking to establish their own sources of income, as well as on-the-job training in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Statistical data on the programme's achievements since 1995 were available to the Committee.

38. The Government had not only taken preventive action to palliate the effects of NAFTA, but had also entered into a labour cooperation agreement with the United States of America and Canada, which established mechanisms for exchange of information and experience and, more importantly, cooperation among the three NAFTA member countries to ensure implementation of their respective labour laws. Six meetings of the Ministers of Labour and other government labour entities had been held so far, and had dealt with safety and hygiene in the workplace and employers' compliance with labour legislation.

39. In 1997 social security services had gone over from a pay-as-you-go system with graduated levels of contribution to an individual funding system, mainly in order to afford total transparency of the benefits regime. The new legislation scrupulously respected insured workers' acquired rights: any person who had contributed prior to the entry into force of the new legislation could opt for either system.

40. Turning to unemployment, he said that 1999 International Labour Organization (ILO) statistics on employment trends, in Latin America and the Caribbean had revealed that in contrast to most of the region, unemployment rates in Mexico had fallen from an annual rate of 3.8 per cent in 1997 to 3.2 per cent in 1998 and 2.8 per cent in 1999 - a fall largely attributable to the rise in female employment. While not entirely satisfactory, those ILO statistics showed that Mexico was making progress in that regard.

41. Mr. GONZÁLEZ FELIX (Mexico), responding to a question from Mr. Sadi, said that social expenditure, which had accounted for 33 per cent of the budget when Mexico had presented its second periodic report in the early 1990s, had risen to a current 60 per cent, with the Government's growing awareness of the need to strengthen social services such as education,

health and housing. Responding to questions from Mr. Riedel and Mr. Ceville concerning court decisions citing the provisions of the Covenant, he said that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was preparing to provide human rights training courses for officials at all levels of the judiciary, who increasingly invoked both Covenants, pursuant to article 104 of the Constitution.

42. An interdepartmental human rights commission set up in 1997 reviewed all the recommendations of the treaty bodies to which Mexico reported, and endeavoured to promote them in particular contexts; such was the case with the Committee's recommendations concerning social spending following examination of Mexico's second periodic report. The Commission also dealt with such issues as globalization, ways of improving the labour situation of workers displaced as a result of trade agreements, and how social spending and the fight against extreme poverty affected development in the different regions.

43. Mr. ZOLLA LUQUE (Mexico), responding to various questions concerning the protection of indigenous land, especially in Chiapas, underscored the complex composition of Mexico's indigenous people who between them spoke no fewer than 62 languages. The authorities were doing their utmost to disseminate information on rights in native languages. Article 4 of the reformed Constitution of early 1992 made specific reference to the recognition of Mexico's multiculturalism at the federal level. Since that date, enormous progress had been made in terms both of individual states' constitutions and of specific legislation on indigenous rights and culture.

44. With regard to land ownership, Mexico had implemented an important agrarian reform, and the Agrarian Reform Department was working on the few unresolved local land ownership disputes. Of course some irregularities existed, as was acknowledged in the report. The Government kept a close eye on drug cultivation, which did not pose a significant problem on indigenous lands. In addition, the Government afforded the indigenous population protection in connection not only with agricultural use of the land, but also with its cultural use, in keeping with their traditions.

45. Mr. GONZÁLEZ FELIX (Mexico), in response to a question from Mr. Ahmed, said that Mexico had made enormous strides since the drafting of its second periodic report, at which time the country had been plagued by a severe economic crisis, with a resultant decline in important economic indicators. The macroeconomic measures taken had remedied the situation and transformed Mexico into one of the world's top 12 international exporters. During consideration of the second report, Mexico had been criticized for its low social spending. However, with the reduction of its debt burden and fiscal gap and with rising oil prices, Mexico was now in a position to improve social expenditure. In 1995 inflation had been running at 50 per cent, as compared to 12 per cent in 1999. The National Consumer Price Index (INPC) had kept pace with those developments and prices had actually fallen.

46. Mr. TIRADO ZAVALA (Mexico) said that the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare organized a monthly meeting to monitor a cooperation agreement among the productive sectors, with the participation of the Ministries of Finance and Public Credit, Agriculture and Rural Development, Public Education, and Trade, the Governor of the Bank of Mexico, representatives of campesino organizations, Mexican employers, workers and the Chambers of Trade and Industry. Emphasizing the positive changes that had taken place in the INPC for goods

and services between 1995 and 1999, he referred Members to the additional statistics produced by the country's price monitoring subcommittee, which were available in the meeting room.

47. Mr. GONZÁLEZ FELIX (Mexico), replying to a question from Mr. Rattray, said that the Government was implementing huge social changes not only to satisfy the needs of the population, but also to comply with the provisions of the Covenant. As reported earlier, social spending had increased by 27 per cent since the presentation of Mexico's second periodic report, and during President Zedillo's tenure that increase had been used to enhance services relating to compulsory education, vaccinations and nutrition.

48. Ms. SALINAS (Mexico), replying to a question from Mrs. Jiménez Butragueño, said that the first draft of the third periodic report had been transmitted to NGOs for their input. NGOs had also played a significant part in the women's participation programme. The target progress rate, which was being met, involved a variety of projects designed and implemented in close cooperation with NGOs. The National Programme against Domestic Violence (PRONAVI) launched in March 1999, had drawn extensively on the experience and advice of NGOs.

49. Ms. TORRES SALAS (Mexico) said that with the 1992 agreement to modernize basic education and the 1993 amendment to article 3 of the Constitution making secondary education compulsory, consultation with and participation by NGOs on educational matters had increased. A number of projects had been launched at the pre-school level, particularly in regard to text content. NGOs had also participated in a seminar on health education.

50. Mr. URBINA FUENTES (Mexico) said the fact that by the year 2000 the population of Mexico would be 100 million gave some idea of the scale of the problems that the country faced in every sphere, whether political, social or economic. It was also a very large country, with an area of some 2 million square kilometres. Only 110,000 settlements had populations of fewer than 500. That also gave an indication of the difficulties encountered in implementing the social rights accorded under the 1917 Constitution. Mexico was currently experiencing a 1.8 per cent annual rate of population growth. Every year 2.2 million Mexicans were born, constituting another enormous challenge from the point of view of the rights to health, education, housing and food. He was glad to report that there were now some 200 NGOs in Mexico, participating to an ever greater extent in programmes designed to advance economic, social and cultural rights in accordance with Mexico's international commitments.

51. Mr. Rattray had asked whether any benchmarks had been set for measuring the success of the various programmes. By way of illustration he referred to measurement of health services coverage. In 1994, 10 million Mexicans had been identified as having no regular access to basic health services. A target of universal coverage within six years had been set, and it was expected that by the year 2000 all Mexicans would have access to those services. The benchmarks used to evaluate the health services had been selected in consultation with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan-American Sanitary Bureau. According to those benchmarks, 16 of the 32 Mexican States had already been identified as affording universal health coverage. The target for the year 2000 was to achieve universal coverage in the State of Oaxaca and in Mexico City, where population density was the highest.

52. Another question had been asked in regard to the scenario for meeting the social needs brought about by the recent negative rate of economic growth. The targets set by the Government for overcoming the effects of the crisis were identified in the National Plan, 1995-2000. A positive rate of economic growth of over 3 per cent had now been achieved.

53. Mr. ZOLLA LUQUE (Mexico) said that many NGOs were active in both the non-indigenous and indigenous sectors of society. His department cooperated closely with organizations working in the field with the indigenous population. In 1999, 203 projects had been financed.

54. The CHAIRPERSON invited the Committee to put questions regarding the responses to numbers 1 to 15 of the list of issues.

55. Mr. MARCHÁN ROMERO said that the fact that Mexico was reporting to the Committee for the third time was a clear indication of the Government's interest in pursuing a dialogue. It was particularly timely that the consideration of Mexico's report should coincide with the visit to Mexico of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

56. He would first take up the situation in Chiapas, which the Committee regarded not simply as a problem that had arisen in respect of a specific area, but rather as symptomatic of what was taking place in a number of parts of the country. There were other States with large indigenous populations, but the situation in Chiapas had elicited greater interest because of its specific features. Although it was rich in natural resources, its poverty rate was the highest in the country. The Committee greatly appreciated the detailed information offered in the first 17 pages of the written responses to the list of issues regarding the concrete steps that had been taken to deal with the situation. The few specific questions which he intended to ask would avoid political issues, which were not within the Committee's competence.

57. He would like, first, to know why the implementation of the San Andrés Agreements had been suspended. Secondly, according to the written replies, the Executive had forwarded a proposal for constitutional reform in the area of indigenous culture and rights to Congress. Had that proposal been accepted?

58. One positive development reported was that, in view of the demand for land in Chiapas, the Government had signed agrarian agreements with 60 campesino associations and 90 independent groups. How did those agreements square with the traditional rights and historic interests of the indigenous population? What had been the effect of the reform of article 25 of the Constitution on traditional land ownership in Chiapas?

59. A matter of considerable interest in the socio-economic context was the role of the Mexican army in Chiapas. Apparently, one third of the country's land forces was involved. The official explanation was that they were providing sanitation and other social services. He would also like further information on the origin of the paramilitary forces reported to be active in the area, and on whether the Government was engaged in any dialogue with them. Another matter of particular concern to the Committee was the displacement of families in Chiapas, which had resulted in the destruction of the social fabric that had existed before the conflict. He would like to know what specific steps had been taken to deal with displacement, and what the position of

the Government was regarding international cooperation and participation in that respect. Moreover, he High Commissioner for Human Rights was to visit Chiapas in the near future to investigate the possibility of technical cooperation in the field of human rights. Had the Government signed any memorandum of understanding in that respect?

60. Still in connection with Chiapas, he noted that the National Human Rights Commission had set up a coordinating body to handle complaints in the conflict zone. According to the replies, the complaints received had constituted only 1.06 per cent of complaints of alleged violations of human rights received nationwide. So small a number would appear to indicate a lack of confidence on the part of the population in the body set up by the Government.

61. Despite the Government's efforts, extreme poverty was still a matter for grave concern in Chiapas, as it was in the rest of the country. He was glad to note that in 1999 almost 60 per cent of federal expenditure was to be devoted to social programmes. Special attention was thus being paid to combating poverty, especially in its extreme forms, but, given the rate of population growth and other economic factors, it was clear that insufficient resources were available to overcome the problem. One of its causes was the marked decline in Mexican wages; the current minimum wage was not enough to cover basic needs.

62. Several members of the Committee had referred to Mexico's structural adjustment programme. In general, structural adjustment programmes tended to leave wealth in the hands of the few. He asked what economic and social measures the Government was taking to alleviate the impact of the programme. It was welcome news that the external debt of Mexico had been reduced to manageable proportions.

63. He wished to receive further information on NAFTA and on any negative effects it might have had nationwide in Mexico. The Government had apparently adopted a series of legislative measures designed to enhance competition, the effect of which had been to bring about unbalanced growth among the various sectors. Jobs traditionally filled by the poorest groups had largely disappeared although there had been some creation of employment in the assembly plant sector. However, according to a number of NGOs, employment conditions there in that section had in fact deteriorated.

64. Lastly, he wished to know what was being done to address the homelessness and displacement of families caused by the recent landslides.

65. The impression he gained from the mass of written information provided by the delegation and by NGOs, as well as from the dialogue with the delegation, was that Mexico had taken a series of steps to remedy insufficiencies in respect of economic, social and cultural rights, but that it had not yet made the necessary radical structural changes in areas where there were historical problems, such as Chiapas. He was confident that in due course the Government would make the changes needed to remedy that situation completely.

66. Mr. TEXIER noted that the delegation had still not explained why it was often the States possessing the greater natural and cultural resources that had the highest levels of poverty and marginalization. What effort was being made to bring about a better distribution of resources throughout the Federal territory? In regard to Chiapas, it would appear that the root cause of the

conflict was decades of neglect. The Federal Government had now been forced to offer assistance, but he wondered whether the decision to provide that assistance through the army had been the right one. There had been no lowering of tension and little improvement in terms of community development. On another matter, he also wished to know what steps were being taken to combat corruption.

67. In regard to gender discrimination, he was particularly concerned about the situation of women workers in assembly plants. ILO had conducted a number of investigations into discriminatory practices in that sector. There were several areas in which Mexican labour legislation was not fully applied; for example in respect of trade union rights. In the case of women, the demand for pregnancy tests on recruitment and during employment, and their dismissal on grounds of pregnancy, were clear violations of articles 6 and 7 of the Covenant regarding the right to work, as well as a violation of Mexico's own legislation. He would like to know what action was being taken to end those practices.

68. The CHAIRPERSON said that the Committee would continue its consideration of the report of Mexico at its next meeting.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.